Coming Before God in Prayer: Psalm 5

Abstract

Prayer is one of the most vital yet most neglected disciplines of the Christian life. This study explores Psalm 5 as a Spirit-given model for how God's people are to come before him, drawing on the broader witness of Scripture and the pastoral wisdom of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Beginning with the New Testament's urgent call to self-control as a condition for prayer, the study moves through five aspects in David's psalm: the essence of prayer as genuine communion with God, the preparation that ought to precede it, adoration and the praise of God's holiness as its chief matter, the indispensable place of confession, the freedom to make requests in keeping with God's will, and finally the joy and peace that flow to the praying soul. Practical observations accompany each section, anchoring these ancient patterns in the ordinary rhythms of Christian life. The article concludes with a reflection on Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 1, illustrating the transforming effect that genuine prayer has on the human heart. The goal throughout is not to reduce prayer to a method but to encourage believers to approach the throne of grace with renewed confidence, reverence, and expectation.

I. A Call to Prayer

Few things the Apostle Peter wrote are more striking than the brief command buried in the seventh verse of his fourth chapter: be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. The instruction is straightforward enough, but the reason Peter gives is striking. He does not call believers to self-control for the sake of moral respectability or social harmony. He calls them to it so that they might pray. Prayer, in Peter's understanding, is not an afterthought in the Christian life. It is the end toward which self-discipline points.

The same apostle, writing a little further on in chapter five, identifies the stakes: the enemy, the devil, prowls about seeking someone to devour. Self-control, then, is no mere virtue. It is a matter of spiritual survival, and its fruit, when cultivated by the Holy Spirit, is a life given to prayer.

Paul, writing to Titus, expands this thought. Self-control is not simply willpower or personal resolve. It is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, as Galatians 5 makes plain. The contrast Paul

draws is vivid. The demoniac in Mark 5 had lost all composure, crying out among the tombs and cutting himself, a picture of a life entirely given over to the absence of self-control. When he met the Lord Jesus Christ, he was found sitting, clothed, and in his right mind. The very phrase translated "right mind" in Mark 5 is the same word rendered "self-control" elsewhere in the New Testament. A life brought into wholeness by the Spirit is, almost inevitably, a praying life.

Paul's observation in Galatians 5:17 is equally sobering: the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the two are in constant conflict. This is the experience of every honest believer. We want to pray more than we actually pray. We intend to pray and find ourselves distracted. But God, in his great mercy, does not leave us to manage this tension alone. He has given us the gift of prayer itself as a means of cultivating the very self-control we need. It is a gracious circle: the Spirit produces self-control, self-control leads to prayer, and prayer draws us deeper into the life of the Spirit.

Psalm 5 stands as one of the richest models in all of Scripture for how that prayer is to take shape. It is no accident that it comes from the pen of David, a man who knew both the heights of communion with God and the depths of his own sin. In it, we find five distinct parts, each illuminating a different facet of what it means to come before God.

II. The Essence of Prayer: Coming to God

D. L. Moody, the great American evangelist of the nineteenth century, once found himself in Edinburgh and was asked to speak to a room full of children. He opened with a simple question: What is prayer? He had his own answer ready, but before he could give it, a young boy stood and recited the Westminster Catechism's answer nearly word for word, defining prayer as an offering of desires to God for things that align with his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of sin and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies. Moody's response was characteristic: "Thank God, my boy, you were born in Scotland."

What is remarkable about that story is not the boy's answer, impressive as it was, but what it reveals about how far the common understanding of prayer has drifted. If the same question were put to a room of children today, in Scotland or anywhere else, the answers would likely bear little resemblance to the catechism's definition.

Psalm 5 does not offer a formal definition, but it captures the essence simply and powerfully. The opening verses set the tone:

> *"Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray. O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch" (Psalm 5:1-3).*

The most basic truth Psalm 5 teaches about prayer is that prayer is coming to God. That may seem obvious, but given the state of our own hearts, it bears saying clearly. We are all prone to treat prayer as a duty to perform rather than a person to approach. We go through the motions, we check the box, and we move on without ever truly coming into the presence of the living God. David's language in verse 2 corrects this tendency: "my King and my God." That is the language of covenant relationship, of personal belonging. The one to whom David prays is not an abstraction or a vending machine for spiritual favors. He is David's King, David's God. And David comes to him as such.

III. Preparation: Arranging the Sacrifice

There is a second aspect of prayer visible in verse 3 that is easy to overlook. The phrase translated "I lay my requests before you" carries a richer meaning in the original Hebrew than the English suggests. It is the same word used in Leviticus to describe what the priests did with the morning sacrifice, carefully arranging the offering on the altar according to God's instructions:

> *"He shall cut it into pieces, with its head and its fat, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire on the altar" (Leviticus 1:12).*

> *"The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not go out. The priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall arrange the burnt offering on it and shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings" (Leviticus 6:12).*

The priest did not simply throw the sacrifice onto the fire. He arranged it with care and deliberateness, following the pattern God had given. Psalm 5 suggests that David approached his prayers with the same intention. He organized his thoughts, ordered his requests, and brought them before God with attention and care.

Spurgeon, in his exposition of Psalm 5, captured this beautifully when he observed that much of the sweetness and efficacy of prayer is lost through a want of careful meditation before it, noting that we should begin to pray before we kneel and not cease when we rise.

This is a timely word. Our age of distraction does not naturally produce the kind of quiet, deliberate preparation Psalm 5 commends. One practical expression of this principle is the use of a prayer guide or prayer journal, something that helps bring order to what might otherwise be scattered and unfocused intercession. A church prayer directory serves a similar function, providing specific names and needs to hold before God rather than vague, general requests.

Verse 3 also draws attention to the pattern of daily prayer. David's morning habit was regular and consistent. The particular hour matters less than the discipline itself. For some, morning prayer is ideal; for others, the demands of young children or irregular schedules make a different time more realistic. The key is not the hour but the constancy, the day-in, day-out returning to God with expectation.

And expectation is precisely what verse 3 closes with. David lays his requests before God and waits. He is not going through a ritual. He expects God to hear and respond according to His goodwill. This is the confidence of a covenant relationship. Those who belong to the Lord may come before him with the same assurance.

IV. The Chief Matter: Adoration of God's Holiness

It is worth pausing to note what David has not yet done by verse 4. He has not made a single request. He has come to God, he has prepared his heart, and now he turns his gaze to who God is:

> *"For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man" (Psalm 5:4-6).*

Richard Phillips, in his volume "Walking with God," identifies adoration as the chief matter of prayer. That is borne out clearly in Psalm 5. Before David brings a single petition, he meditates on God's holiness. He considers that God takes no pleasure in evil, that the wicked cannot stand

in his presence, and that he hates all who do wrong. He is the holy God, utterly opposed to sin and evil.

It is significant that David finds this a reason to praise rather than a reason to despair. The psalmist in Psalm 22 captures the same instinct: "But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel." God's holiness is not a barrier to worship. It is the very ground of it. To behold a God who is entirely righteous, who hates what is evil and will not allow it to endure, is a magnificent thing, particularly when the world around us overflows in injustice and corruption.

One resource that many have found helpful for learning about adoration is Psalm 145, where the psalmist moves through attribute after attribute of God, praising him for his majesty, compassion, grace, faithfulness, and eternity. Believers who struggle to know what to say in adoration will find the Psalms a reliable teacher.

And for Christians on this side of the cross, there is still a more specific focus for adoration: the Lord Jesus Christ himself. To reflect on who he is and what he has done, to meditate on his person and his work, to trace the love that brought him from the eternal glory of the Father to the cross of Calvary, is to find an inexhaustible supply of adoring praise.

V. Reckoning with Sin: The Place of Confession

The transition between verse 6 and verse 7 is one of the most striking moments in the psalm. David has been describing the fate of the wicked, those who tell lies, those who are bloodthirsty and deceitful, those whom God abhors. And then he writes:

> *"But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you" (Psalm 5:7).*

"But I." The contrast is intentional, but not the one we might expect. David does not say, "But I, being righteous, may come into your house." He says, "But I, by your great mercy." It is as if David, in the act of describing the wicked, suddenly recognizes that the description fits his own heart as well. He, too, is a sinner. He, too, is capable of deceit. There is none righteous, no not one.

The New American Standard renders the key word "lovingkindness," capturing the Hebrew "hesed," that rich covenant word that speaks of God's steadfast, loyal, tenacious love for his people. It is this, and not any merit of David's own, that makes his approach to God possible.

The phrase "I will bow down toward your holy temple" also carries weight. The temple had not yet been built in David's day, but the tabernacle stood as the dwelling of God's presence, and the sacrificial system pointed forward to the sacrifice God would one day make by sending his Son into the world. David, bowing toward the holy place, was a man who understood that access to God comes through atonement. He came to God on the basis of what God would provide.

Psalm 32 makes the cost of unconfessed sin clear. David describes the physical and spiritual toll of keeping silent about his sin, his bones wasting away, God's hand lying heavy on him day and night. Then comes the turn: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin." Confession opens what silence had closed.

The question this section asks every believer is a profound one. Is confession a regular part of prayer, or do we tend to quietly carry known sin, hoping God will overlook it? The gospel's invitation is exactly the opposite of avoidance. Because Christ took our guilt upon Himself, confession is not punishment but rather a way of returning home.

VI. Petition: Making Requests with God's Honor in View

Only after adoration and confession does David arrive at what many people treat as the whole of prayer. He brings his petitions:

> *"Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me. For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue. Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you" (Psalm 5:8-10).*

What David asks for is instructive. His first request is not for victory over his enemies, or for their punishment, or for his own comfort. It is to be led in God's righteousness. He knows his

own righteousness is imperfect and unstable. He wants to walk in a way that reflects God's character rather than his own limited judgment.

Even his prayer for judgment on his enemies is framed around God's honor. He does not ask God to punish them because they have inconvenienced him. He asks God to act because they have rebelled against God. The concern, even in petition, is for God's glory and the vindication of his ways.

This does not mean that petitions must be elaborate or theological. God invites his people to bring everything to him, small and large alike. He is a Father who delights in the requests of his children. But Psalm 5 does suggest that petitions offered within the context of prior adoration and confession have a different quality to them. They are less self-centered and more oriented toward God's will. The believer who has spent time beholding God's holiness and confessing his own sin is unlikely to approach petition as though God exists to serve his preferences.

VII. The Fruit of Prayer: Joy and Peace

Psalm 5 ends not with the petition but with the fruit that flows from a life of prayer:

> *"But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you. For you bless the righteous, O LORD; you cover him with favor as with a shield" (Psalm 5:11-12).*

The joy David describes here is not contingent on the specific petitions being answered in the way he hoped. It is the joy of finding refuge in God himself, of coming to the one who is a shield and a strong tower. The gladness flows not from circumstances but from communion.

Paul makes the same connection in Philippians 4. Rejoice in the Lord always, he writes, and then immediately turns to anxiety and prayer. The peace that follows is the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guarding hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. That peace is the fruit of bringing everything to God in prayer with thanksgiving. It is not earned by the quality of the prayer or the length of it. It is the gift of God to those who come.

This is illustrated vividly in the account of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. Hannah was barren, her rival Peninnah tormented her, and she wept bitterly. She went to the tabernacle and poured out her soul before the Lord. When she rose from her prayer, verse 18 records that "her face was no longer downcast." She had not yet received a child. Nothing in her circumstances had changed. Peninnah was still there. But Hannah had prayed, and something in her had shifted. She had cast her burden on the Lord, and she knew, in whatever way the Spirit makes such things known, that she had been heard.

The joy and peace God gives through prayer are not always loud or demonstrative. But they are real. They are the quiet confidence of a soul that has come before its Maker and King and rested there.

Conclusion

Psalm 5 does not reduce prayer to a formula or a set of steps to be mechanically followed. The Holy Spirit, as Romans 8:26 reminds us, intercedes for us with groanings that words cannot express, and there is a mystery at the heart of prayer that no outline can fully contain. But Psalm 5 does offer a gracious and practical pattern: come to God deliberately, prepare your heart with care, begin with adoration of who he is, reckon honestly with your sin, bring your petitions in keeping with his will, and rest in the joy and peace that come from finding refuge in him alone.

David wrote this psalm from experience. He was a man who prayed in the morning, and the morning showed in his life. Not perfectly, not without failure, but with a consistent returning to the God who was his King and his God. That same God invites all who belong to him, in every generation, to come and pray with that same expectation.

The Apostle Peter's word to scattered and suffering Christians remains as urgent as it ever was. Be self-controlled and alert so that you can pray. And the promise embedded in Psalm 5 remains equally sure: those who take refuge in God, who come before him in prayer with honest hearts, are the ones who will be found singing for joy.

This study draws on insights from Richard Phillips's *Walking with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust) and on expository content from Psalm 5. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the English Standard Version.